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ARCHIVING A PROPHECY

An ethnographic history of the 'John Frum files' (Tanna, Vanuatu, 1941–1980)

Marc Tabani

ABSTRACT. Repeated signs of a large-scale rebellion on the South Pacific island of Tanna (Vanuatu) appeared in 1941. Civil disobedience was expressed through reference to a prophetic figure named John Frum. In order to repress this politico-religious movement, categorized later as a cargo cult in the anthropological literature, the British administration accumulated thousands of pages of surveillance notes, reports and commentaries. This article proposes an introduction to the existence of these documents known as the 'John Frum files', which were classified as confidential until the last few years. The presentation of this body of documentation follows Ann Stoler's injunction to study colonial archives not only as data sources but also as an ethnographic subject in its own right. An ethnographic overview of the John Frum files will contribute to recent debates among anthropologists about 'cargo cult archives' and how their colonial authors in Tanna and John Frum cultists were inextricably bound up with one another.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of cargo cults has been associated with major debates in the study of culture change in the Pacific. This label, attributed to indigenous movements showing millenarian tendencies, has progressively lost some of its relevance with the decline of its extensive academic use. However, it has never been really abandoned and still possesses certain advantages: 'even if one disagrees about its use, everybody who hears "cargo cult" immediately knows what is being spoken about'.¹ I will use the term 'cargo cult' in the same loose manner as Michael Scott when he refers to social experiences, cultural dynamics and religious syncretisms which share certain 'elements from a well-known repertoire, [that] readers familiar with the literature on so-called "cargo cults" in Melanesia will immediately recognize' (2012:119). This inextricable link between cargo cults and the literature about them has meant that they have mostly been studied in first- or second-hand written documents and much less through direct observation. However, the way in which certain famous cultic movements in Melanesia have inspired the production of confidential grey literature that has filled up the colonial archives may be less familiar to discerning readers.

In the mid-1980s previous anthropological debates involving cargo cults began to be succeeded and supplemented by the so-called literary turn in anthropology.² Riding

¹ James Clifford, personal communication. See also Tabani (2013:11).

² Clifford and Marcus (1986). See also Scholte (1987).

that wave, Lamont Lindstrom has stressed the textual aspects of ‘cargo cult narratives’, first compiled by administrators and missionaries before being formalized by anthropologists, and then being massively diffused to a wider readership by Western popular culture (1993). Other authors targeted the validity of the anthropological terminology used in writing about such cults (Hermann 1992, Kaplan 1995) and at times even questioned their very existence as cultural and historical phenomena (McDowell 1988).

My aim in this article is to adopt an alternative approach to this textual relativism (or literary criticism removed from Melanesian social facts) by following the recent and promising ‘archival turn’ in anthropology. I will therefore focus on the literature on cargo cults, while keeping in mind the move from ‘archive-as-source to archive-as-subject’ (Stoler 2002:93) that made it conceivable to develop an ethnographic approach to colonial archives. For this purpose, I will rehabilitate the colonial administration’s files on the John Frum movement, supplemented by historical data gathered from the South Pacific island of Tanna, and treat these records as an exceptional testimony of the ways in which the colonial authorities in Vanuatu (the former Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides, independent since 1980) faced the birth of a new political and religious tradition while also becoming irremediably part of it themselves.³

The ‘John Frum files’ represent unique historical material for the ethnography of interactions between the Tannese and the colonial authorities in the administrative treatment of a process of ritualizing foreign domination and prophesying its end.⁴ With only a few exceptions, none of the many references to the John Frum movement in the anthropological literature on cargo cults has made any mention of these files since the 1950s, despite their being among the largest and most complete archives ever put together on this topic. Following Stoler, reviewing the John Frum files not only for their factual value, but also as a form of knowledge production can show us how, through colonial domination, they became ‘monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography’ (2002:90). In Tanna from the 1940s, colonial administrators recorded more ethnographic data on the John Frum movement than all the professional anthropologists who conducted fieldwork on the island subsequently, as well as producing more data on this topic than on any other relating to the administration of natives affairs in the former New Hebrides. John Frum was a permanent priority for many administrators who became emotionally involved in the story of this syncretic belief.

³ I had full access to these files in the Western Pacific Archives (WPA) in Auckland (June 2014), the Archives Territoriales de la Nouvelle-Calédonie (ATNC) in Noumea (November 2014) and the National Archives (NA) in London (December 2016).

⁴ The term ‘John Frum files’ was coined by Edgar Rice (1974), a journalist who searched for them unsuccessfully. This documentation collected by the New Hebrides British Service between 1941 and 1980 consists of several administrative files originally called “Jonfrum cult”, “Jonfrum movement” or “Jonfrum activities” (see references). John Frum was initially (and sometimes still is) called ‘John Broom’ by the Tannese, he who would sweep all the Whites off the island. In the first administrative reports, this name was transcribed in the forms of ‘Jonfrum’, ‘Jongfrum’ or ‘Jangfrum’.

To begin with, I will stress the distinctive historical contexts of the first and second generations of cargo cults in Melanesia and the colonial impact on their emergence and development. Attention will then be drawn to the problems involved in referring to the archives in studying cargo cults since, for this specific issue as for many others investigated by cultural theory, 'the term "archive" is used in a variety of ways that lack a consistent definition of the concept' (Basu and De Jong 2016:7). This will lead me to consider some strategic aspects of how the John Frum files were built up and how they deeply influenced the evolution of the John Frum movement itself. First the framing of such categories as John Frum 'beliefs', 'activities' or 'cult', embodied within a 'John Frum movement', was validated for the purpose of the coercive administrative ethnography that is so characteristic of the John Frum files. Simultaneously, on the Tannese side, John Frum followers also tried hard to turn the categories indexed by these files to their own advantage.

This article, which is merely preliminary to ongoing research on the compatibilities between oral tradition and administrative ethnography, presents an introduction to the existence of these documents. First, I will provide a short historical description of their creation, accumulation and structure. I will then comment on certain political, economic and religious aspects of their content. My perspective will not simply go against the generally accepted colonial categories (i.e. go against the 'archival grain'⁵ in order to find out what this body of documentation could tell us about indigenous beliefs). Nor is it my intention merely to trace their constitutive aspects (going along with the 'archival grain' [Stoler 2009], i.e. to expose what these files reveal about colonial domination and its mentality). My present purpose is to make a few comments on some broad points of interaction between local beliefs and colonial mentality. Other leading points of interest in the following sections are how the beliefs of colonial administrators affected those of the Tannese and vice versa, and how the files caused some of their authors to become personally integrated into the John Frum mythology.

CULTS AND CONFLICTS IN COLONIAL MELANESIA

Indigenous movements in colonial Melanesia that came to be classified as cargo cults in the post-1945 era, after this label had been diffused by anthropologists, had previously been identified by European observers as 'new religions' (Thomson 1895, Sutherland 1910) or 'new religious cults' (Chinnery and Haddon 1917). At the beginning of the twentieth century such phenomena were not perceived as having serious implications for the expansion of the colonization and Christianization of the Pacific. Early admin-

⁵ Following Walter Benjamin's recommendation 'to brush history against the grain' (1974:697) when it comes to the reification of power relationships as archives, Carlo Ginzburg encouraged researchers 'to learn to read evidence against the intentions of those who had produced it' (1999:24).

istrative and ethnographic reports represented large-scale non-violent cultic outbreaks as sporadic by-products of culture contact. They were comprehended neither as 'true' cults or 'genuine' religions, nor as 'real' rebellions or significant expressions of political protest.

The so-called 'Vailala madness', which developed among the Elema people near the Vailala River in the delta region of the Papuan Gulf at the end of World War I, provides a good example of the relative lack of concern such outbreaks inspired in the early colonial authorities (Williams 1923, 1976). The ritualized mass mobilization of the Elema was not seen as an early attempt to achieve the emancipation of indigenous people from foreign domination. In the absence of a clear anti-colonial strategy, the Vailala movement was not defined in terms of any aspect of its political agenda. In fact early field observers, like the government anthropologist Francis Edgar Williams, stressed the sudden appearance of 'aberrant' religious forms in an archaic society that was unable to face the brutal intrusion of foreign, uncontrolled material and intangible realities: these were seen as 'crisis cults' (La Barre 1971) for lost 'primitives in transition' (Kaplan 1995:96). Constant efforts by the movement's leaders and followers to encourage the destruction of traditional ritual ceremonies and the erasing of the main aspects of the old socio-political order and cosmological representations were seen as an obvious sign of the presence of an ethnically-related and induced collective mental illness taking the form of a delirious symptom of cultural self-destruction.

However, some colonial agents encouraged their hierarchy not to reduce the complexity of the Vailala madness to a form of 'mass hysteria'. In 1928, Robert Marett, a government anthropologist in British New Guinea, encouraged his colleagues to proceed carefully on this issue:

The authorities might well describe it as a 'madness'. Yet they are well advised to have taken no drastic measures to suppress it, preferring to allow time for scientific diagnosis to be made before remedial action. With the unfortunate precedent of Pontius Pilate before their eyes, governments should be chary of applying police methods to new religious movements (Marett 1928:xi).

Great theological revelations, warned medical officer Walter Strong, may have started in a similar way to the Vailala Madness. In his preface to the published version of Williams' report on this indigenous movement in the Papuan Gulf, he described it as 'a present-day example of the beginnings of a creed and ritual', to which he added the suggestion that 'Mohammedanism in its earliest days began in such a psychological atmosphere' (Strong 1923:ix).

Partly following this prudent advice, the British colonial authorities refrained from violently suppressing early indigenous movements, despite their increasing number, but remained highly sceptical of their viability. As a cultural pathological syndrome, the Vailala Madness would, they believed, spontaneously vanish in the course of the convergent progress of civilization and Christianization, if not, more brutally, through drastic

depopulation. Government officers at that time found it impossible to imagine that cultic outbreaks, prophetic leaders, frenetic collective trances, messianic hopes and beliefs about a connection between the power of Europeans and that of the local ancestral spirits would continue to develop among the peoples of Melanesia far into the future.⁶ Nevertheless the Papuans of the Vailala Madness should consider themselves lucky that their cultural innovations, techniques and ritualizations of processes of change were marginalized through a colonial policy of non-interference. As a result they did not have to endure much coercion from the colonial government and therefore did not attract a great deal of attention from its bureaucracy either.

This policy of non-interference on the part of the colonial authorities towards the alleged cultural delirium of Melanesians in the British and later Australian administered territories came to a sudden end with the Pacific War and the Japanese invasions of New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. The indigenous movements that emerged and started to grow in the 1940s in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, drawing substantial inspiration from the war situation, were placed under close scrutiny, and many of them suffered much more systematic and serious repression. Field observations in the Papuan Gulf made by Williams in the 1920s were recorded in a report of fewer than thirty pages in which the author commented at length on the reason for his dislike of the Vailala Madness and similar outbreaks (1923). Other cultic occurrences were likewise superficially reported and analysed.

There is nonetheless nothing comparable here to the several hundreds of documents produced by the Anglo-French authorities of the New Hebrides Condominium on the John Frum movement that began at the end of the 1930s on the island of Tanna. Emblematic of a 'second generation' of so-called cargo cults in Melanesia, it shared many religious and political aspects with similar earlier movements, typically combining millenarian expectations with political protest. But unlike earlier movements, it was seriously documented in daily, monthly and decennial reports filling thousands of pages with observations and descriptions, analyses and comments, regulations and judgments written, recorded and compiled over several periods of time. A huge part of this grey literature is devoted to the way John Frum beliefs, prophecies and ritual activities were combated and how the movement's leaders and followers were suppressed.

THE TEXTUALITY OF CARGO CULTS

On the matter of cargo cults, no significant anthropological attention had been paid to the issue of archives, prior to the publication of Lindstrom's brilliant anthropological monograph "Cargo cult: strange stories of desire from Melanesia and beyond" (1993). In line with his extended ethnographic work on the John Frum movement in Tanna, he

⁶ See, for example, Jebens (1990), Lattas (1998), Macintyre (2013), Tabani (2013).

devoted this book to the endless production on a global scale of narratives, stories and texts inspired by local and cultural expressions of historical change in Melanesia. What he calls the 'cargo cult archive' is an on-going process of accumulating and printing documents and material on this topic to serve Western intellectual needs (Lindstrom 2004:18). If the cargo cult archive is supposed to find its origins in the historical and ethnographic realities of Melanesia, its contemporary development lies wholly beyond Melanesia. 'Cargo cult motifs' essentially reflect Western predispositions (Lindstrom 1993: Chapter 3), being historically related to Western discourses on Melanesia, rather than to the social facts that are genuine politico-religious protest movements. Lindstrom assigns to the anthropologist the task of disentangling the 'main narrative story-lines' that are entwined in the 'cargo cult archive' (2004:18).

However, this is no easy task, since anything that can be googled on cargo cults becomes an eligible reference or file for this ever-expanding archive. Any collectible item or image-sharing of 'cargo motifs' relating to 'cargo thinking' or 'cargoism' can supplement the database. This 'cargo cult material' can be subdivided into several categories and different literary genres promoted by different kinds of authors. John Frum cargo cult motifs have been created, among others, by administrators, missionaries, anthropologists, US soldiers, novelists, journalists, poets and film-makers (Lindstrom 1993). However, according to Lindstrom, the real 'cargoists' or consumers of cargo cult narratives are exclusively Westerners, not Melanesian cultists (1993: Chapter 4).

The significance of the cargo cult archive has also been discussed by several contributors to the volume "Cargo, culture and cultural critique", edited by Holger Jebens (2004b). Jaap Timmer (2004:119), for instance, refers to the 'immense archive on cargo cult' encompassed by Lindstrom's focus on Western discourses about such cults and their roots in a Western metadiscourse about desire. According to Ton Otto, Lindstrom's work has been supported by authors who consider that 'the archive of cargo cult literature' should be explored exclusively for 'its potentiality for developing a Western cultural critique' (2004:209). According to Otto, the comparative aspects of the term 'cargo cult' should not be lost sight of. The term will endure precisely because 'one of the lasting contributions of the comprehensive archive of cargo cult studies is that it gives a solid basis for comparison and culture critique' (2009:97).

Joel Robbins is also concerned with the significance of criticism of the notion of cargo cult for 'future uses of the archive materials' if their limits encompass everything 'that has been published about cargo cults' (2004:243–244). There is a real need, he says, for reflection on the criticisms of cargo cults and their archives, since deconstructionist anthropologists have turned 'the cargo cult literature into an archive under critique', without 'relating cultural critique itself to the object of cargo cults' (2004:246). Robbins expresses his preference for a more conventional conception of archives: grey literature and classic monographs, like those of Peter Worsley (1957) or Kenelm Burridge (1960), remain 'a crucial part of cargo cult archives' (Robbins 2004:249) as resources for ethnographically grounded comparative studies of millenarian movements.

Indeed, the archival focus in studies of cargo cults emerged in a situation of deconstruction. Theoretical perspectives or analyses using the notion of the cargo cult have begun to be repeatedly criticized. For several ‘cargo critics’ as defined by Jebens (2004a), like Nancy McDowell (1988, 2000), Elfriede Hermann (1992, 2013), Martha Kaplan (1995, 2004) or Doug Dalton (2000), cargo cults do not exist as an identifiable object of study but originate in a colonial imaginary. That is, they only exist as scholarly reifications and colonial phantasmagorias intended to pathologize Melanesian cultures in order to reinforce colonial control over them (see Jebens 2004a). Lindstrom’s work has been precious to these authors since it encourages the study of cargo cults for what they are supposed to represent for Westerners, beyond their ethnographic reality. Research on and analyses of archived cargo cult materials would thus seem to be nothing more than a study of the Western Self.

GREY LITERATURE AND OLD CARGO CULT MATERIAL

In the reflexive turn towards cargo cults, taken to gain a grip on the infinite growth of their archive, Kaplan is among the rare ‘cargo critics’ to target the historical material on the Tuka movement archived by the British administration in Fiji. Despite blaming Worsley (1957) for having labelled the Tuka movement a cargo cult in his classic monograph, Kaplan makes no secret of the great respect she has for his work, ‘in particular his careful if brief study of colonial archives concerning the Fijian “Tuka movement”’ (Kaplan 2004:61). Although Worsley was not the first nor the only author to have included the Tuka movement in the cargo cult category, for Kaplan these particular archives merely demonstrate that such cults and millenarian movements do not exist as Pacific or non-Western phenomena, but rather as a category in Western culture and colonial practice:

‘Tuka’ was a thing to colonial officers and has come down to us as such, as in the colonial imagination it incited the drafting of ordinances for its criminal prosecutions, and the deportation of its practitioners, gaining its own sites in the colonial archival files and indexes (Kaplan 2004:65).

Kaplan brings us back to the study of colonial files, which in Lindstrom’s interpretation of them were produced by administrators, missionaries and anthropologists in a specific historical period.

According to Lindstrom (1993), the original ‘John Frum files’ or historical ‘John Frum texts’ written or compiled by administrators of the New Hebrides British Services (NHBS) are just very limited and redundant items in a broader ‘John Frum cargo cult archive’. The story of these files starts with an inquiry by the British District Agent (BDA) of the Southern Province of the New Hebrides Condominium, James Nicol, in November 1940 into certain mysterious events which took place in a region of south-

west Tanna called Green Point (Nicol 21/05/1941, Western Pacific Archives [WPA] 1940–1942). To the first reports on these initial troubles were added those he wrote up until his death in 1944 and the many more that were written regularly by his successors until their last reports in June 1980 about a rebellion in Tanna involving the John Frum movement during troubles leading up to Vanuatu's independence. Reverend Calvert, a Presbyterian missionary formerly based on Tanna, confided to Lindstrom that these files were supposed to have vanished from the BDA's office in Lenakel in the mid-1970s (Lindstrom 1993:79). Lindstrom suggested that they were probably stolen by some 'cargoist stranger' (1993:79).

One unique testimony to their existence is an incomplete twelve-page document published by the journalist Edgar Rice entitled "John Frum – a diary of events", which summarizes official British administrative investigations and correspondence about the movement between 1941 and 1957 (Rice 1974: Appendix). However, Lindstrom is not distressed by the loss of these files, since in his view it is still possible to 'find primary British and French administrative John Frum texts reproduced here and there throughout the John Frum archive' (1993:81). Thus, just a few excerpts from these files describing the main moments of the John Frum movement's history provided sufficient material for the immense 'John Frum archive' and the even vaster 'cargo cult archive'. Lindstrom mainly stresses the fact that the original administrative John Frum files have been sought in vain: 'Cargoists [foreign cargo cult enthusiasts] chase strange treasure. The cultist pursuit of hidden cargo becomes a paradigm for cargoism's hunt for secret cargo texts' (Lindstrom 1993:79).

In fact, Calvert was wrong in claiming they had vanished. The John Frum files never disappeared, at least not the most complete or main corpus of them; they have just been ignored by many specialists. Moreover, many more historical files relating to the John Frum movement exist that were archived by both the British and French colonial administrations. The largest bodies of reports and documents were compiled by the NHBS archives, the most complete copies of which were held by the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC) archives, initially located in Suva from 1875. The NHBS collections joined other remaining parts of the WPHC archives when they were dismantled after Fiji's independence in 1970 and came to form the so-called Western Pacific Archives (WPA).

The WPA collections were again fragmented with the closure of the WPHC in 1978. Unlike those concerning Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu, which were returned to these territories, the NHBS collections were not returned to Vanuatu after independence in 1980. They were first transferred to London with the remaining parts of the WPA and, after an agreement with the United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office, were moved once again, this time to New Zealand to be hosted by the University of Auckland Library (see Innes 2007). As noted by Gregory Rawlings, parts of the WPA became the so-called 'migrated archives' of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO):

'Migrated Archives' had been repatriated to the UK between 1963 and 1994, but only in 2011 were they fully and publicly disclosed as the result of an English court hearing into claims of human rights violations by British authorities during the Mau Mau emergency in Kenya (1952–1960) (Rawlings 2015:189).

Hence, the collections of records forming the John Frum files are scattered among different institutions. A residual part of the original FCO archive is still hosted by the National Archives in London, while most of them were sent to Auckland to form the WPA.

JOHN FRUM FILES LOST AND FOUND

The John Frum files are a huge accumulation of reports, letters, interviews, legal decisions, notifications, telegrams and newspaper excerpts, mostly containing information on the local situation in Tanna, proceedings regarding remedial and punitive actions, and general comments on and analyses of successive John Frum events intended to increase understanding of the nature of the troubles engendered by the Tannese cultists. These files were formed through a complex administrative distribution network for the exchange of documents between British District Agents, British Resident Commissioners, High Commissioners of the Western Pacific and members of the British Colonial Office staff and their French counterparts, that is, French District Agents, French Resident Commissioners and other administrators of the *Ministère des colonies*. At first, in 1942, the British administration decided to open a file called "Jonfrum cult activities" only three months after the first extended report had been mailed from Tanna by British District Agent (BDA) Nicol (WPA 1940–1942). Indeed, the concluding notes in the first file start with the sentence: 'This Jonfrum business is getting past a joke' (WPA 1940–1942). Tragically, its voluminous bureaucratic treatment and its long-lasting repression was no joke either. A record called "Diary of events", concerning the movement's activities on Tanna from November 1940 to May 1957 and compiled in 1959 by BDA Challons (WPA 1957), provides a good overall view of both the successive John Frum outbreaks and the concerns and activities of the British and French administrators in trying to contain them:

[Six initial archive files are listed in] eight [historical] phases, each phase being characterized by a fresh outbreak of Jonfrum manifestations. These manifestations have a certain sameness in form and consist in the main of excessive dancing and kava drinking, extravagant spending, 'appearances' of Jonfrum, the hoisting of flags, open flouting of mission teaching and European influence, reputed arrival of warships and aircraft and resentment of authority and interference (Challons 11/12/1957, WPA 1957).

All these events were described in great detail in reports analysed and commented on by several British and French administrators. Some of the many social disturbances in Tanna came under close bureaucratic scrutiny for months and even years. Divided into

successive phases in the aforementioned 'diary', these events constituted what Jean Guiart identified as inter-related 'affaires', amalgamated under the same 'John Frum label'.⁷

According to BDA Nicol, John Frum activities started with the Green Point affair (WPA 1940–1942). Goats were killed to feed Frum's followers and a house was built to host this mysterious stranger during his nightly visits to a village on the south-west coast. John Frum gave orders to spend all the money and to stop providing casual labour for Europeans. A rush took place in the stores, and many bullocks and pigs were killed. The situation was also marked by repeated non-attendance at church by the whole population. Dances were held nearly every night, and kava was drunk to excess.

This first affair was followed by another concerning John Frum's children (WPA 1940–1942), Isaac and Jacob, who were reported by Mweles, a prominent leader of the movement, to have landed secretly by plane in the bush in East Tanna. During the same period, a letter was seized from Joe Nalpin, a Tannese policeman in Port Vila, instructing his fellow villagers to build a house for John Frum. Anti-British feelings were continuously expressed, sometimes along with pro-Japanese talk. Traders were threatened, and John Frum was reported to have a warship as well as allegedly advocating licentious behaviour between young people.

Another affair was characterized by a new outbreak of John Frum activities (WPA 1942–1945) involving Neloig, another John Frum leader from Green Hill, who had tried to persuade the Tannese, under threat of their being shot, to build an aerodrome. Forty-five members of the New Hebrides Defence Force were sent to Tanna, and fifty-six islanders were arrested. The colonial authorities had concluded that the situation in Tanna had become anarchic and they complained about regular orgiastic dancing, excessive kava drinking, the breakdown of custom and communal life, and the deterioration of sanitation and hygiene.

The 'price tickets and coconuts affair' started with an incident in a store in East Tanna regarding the removal of price tickets (WPA 1945–1948); fourteen participants were arrested, three of them being sentenced to five years in prison. John Frum leaders banished to Malekula sent special coconuts to Tanna, which were planted in a ceremony. This was followed by the affair of 'Captain World' (1954–1956), a tall mysterious stranger in fact impersonated by Nakomaha, a major John Frum leader from the east-coast who claimed to be the 'head of the Tannese' and instigated a strong revival of prophecies (WPA 1957–1961).

The 'flags affair' was inspired by the same leader. Red flags were hoisted in Sulphur Bay on 15th February 1957 in the presence of 2,000 natives hoping to see John Frum. On this occasion, Nakomaha declared that a couple of old American flags would become symbols of Tannese aspirations. Wild rumours about ships and submarines were spread. That same year the colonial administration inaugurated a new policy of

⁷ Guiart (1956:209). The next paragraphs follow the timeline of John Frum events given by BDA Challons in his diary (Challons 11/12/1959, WPA 1957).

non-intervention. An American ship, the “Yankee”, visited Tanna, and its Captain gave a public speech to John Frum followers ‘pointing out that in America people had to work for what they had, not wait for it to appear by other less certain means’ (WPA 1957).

The most remarkable aspect of these early John Frum affairs, as presented by BDA Challon in his diary, is not only the fact that this document offers a useful overview of the main events during the period the John Frum movement was completely illegal, but also how it managed to summarize these ‘activities’ so briefly. The diary is a reference sheet for the six original files covering the period from 1941 to 1957, and it provides a list of sub-files concerning every aspect and detail of significant John Frum affairs. The number of these records, as well as their size, is certainly extremely impressive. Altogether these documents amount to 620 sub-files. Ten percent of them at least are detailed reports (weekly, monthly, quarterly), and there are also a dozen major reports on the whole history of the John Frum movement. Along with many single-page documents, these reports often consist of between three and fifteen pages and sometimes, in the case of the main reports, many more (over fifty pages). For 1951 alone, over a thousand pages of documents were written.

Over two hundred more sub-files were archived for the period from 1957 to 1962 (following the six original files). Many of them relate to the Haroun Tazieff affair (1959), named after a renowned French volcanologist who was prevented from pursuing scientific experiments on the Yasur volcano because John Frum leaders accused him of being a ‘cleverman’ whose intention was to capture the power of John Frum devils residing in the volcano (National Archives [NA] 1957–1959). The John Frum files were closed in the mid-1960s but reopened later, from 1974 to 1975 (NA 1974–1975a, b) and finally for the single year of 1980 (NA 1979–1980), thus adding over five thousand more pages of documentation. During these later periods, the colonial administration mainly documented the affair of Antoine Fornelli, a self-proclaimed King of Tanna. This Corsican settler and activist encouraged an insurrectionary atmosphere among John Frum groups, attempted to federate all the scattered John Frum and customary groups into a movement called Forcona (‘four corners’) and proclaimed the independence of the ‘Tanna nation’ before being arrested, expelled and jailed in New Caledonia (see Tabani 2008a).

SECRET JOHN FRUM FILES AND THEIR COLONIAL AUTHORS

An important characteristic of the John Frum files is undoubtedly the secrecy surrounding them. With the exception of a two-year period (1978–1980) after the closing of the WPHC, when the archives were still located in Fiji, they were classified as confidential until their transfer to Auckland in 1992. The very existence of these files may have been considered embarrassing by the British administration, since they revealed yet another

direct challenge to their colonial power. In the context of World War II, with the massive presence of American troops and US military command over the New Hebrides, the British administrators, and even more so their French counterparts in the New Hebrides (who in 1940 immediately declared their support for General De Gaulle's Free French Forces), were inclined to conceal from the Americans any failings in what still remained of their authority.

However, after the war and the full restoration of the colonial trusteeship, the degree of secrecy concerning the John Frum files was even extended. In May 1947, British Resident Commissioner (BRC) Blackwell decided to introduce a special government policy imposing 'a regime of silence on the part of the European population in so far as concerns Jonfrum and all his acts past or conjectured, most particularly in conversation with natives' (Blackwell 09/05/1947, WPA 1945–1948). While the Tannese were not allowed to speak about John Frum or even utter his name, and Europeans were encouraged not to discuss the issue with them, only District Agents and their indigenous Assessors had the right to collect facts and evidence about 'cranky talks' and any strange rumours circulating in the bush. Given this degree of secrecy, it is remarkable that so many events and so much talk about John Frum affairs could have been so massively reported and recorded.

This regime of confidentiality seems to have been strictly respected. Only Guiart (1956:130) had full access to all the files already archived in the mid-1950s, but he had to promise the Condominium authorities officially that he would not publish this material.⁸ In the 1970s, Joël Bonnemaïson (1986:549) was only given limited access to some French copies. The last researchers to have mentioned the John Frum files were Julia Wilkinson (1979) and Robert and Janet Gregory (1984), who consulted them in Suva just before their transfer to London. Since then these files have never been quoted again, except in 2007 by Jeremy MacClancy in a biographical essay on William Nakomaha.

The John Frum files are mostly a British creation, without a real quantitative or qualitative counterpart in French archives.⁹ Most of the correspondence they contain is internal to the British administrative network, and many of the reports produced did not pass through the hands of French administrators. On the other hand, as indicated by the notes in the files, they were extensively read by every new BRC in Vila and BDA in Tanna, as well as by other British officers working for the intelligence services in the New Hebrides, Fiji or London. Usually, only sworn officials had complete access to

⁸ Haut Commissariat 10/05/1949, Archives Territoriales de la Nouvelle-Calédonie [ATNC] (1944–1970). An exception was made for Guiart's monograph about Tanna which reproduced a short report on John Frum written by BDA Nicol on 6th May 1941 in an appendix (Guiart 1956:406–409).

⁹ The imbalance in size and historical depth between the British and French archives on Tanna had already been noted by Guiart in the 1950s (1956:130) and became ever more disproportionate up until Vanuatu's independence. This statement is also true for all the administrative colonial archives on the New Hebrides, including the John Frum records specifically. For instance, the Haut-Commissariat's files had only put together fewer than three hundred pages of documents in a sub-file on "Religions et sects – affaire néo-païens et agitation Tanna Jonfrum" (ATNC 1944–1970).

these documents. Two BRCs wrote lengthy historical reports on the John Frum movement based on material taken from the files, which were released in abridged form for a wider newspaper readership (Rentoul 1949, Barrow 1951). Reading these documents may have helped colonial agents and officers to think about the limits of direct colonial rule in Tanna. Since the very beginning, the colonial administration had been aware that the John Frum movement might endure as a long-term form of opposition. Three years after the start of the whole affair, BDA Nicol had already stated: 'it is quite evident that we may expect sporadic attempts to renew the Jonfrum movement every time some mad coon gets it into his head that he is Jonfrum' (Nicol 15/11/1943, WPA 1942–1945).

The long-term repression suffered by John Frum's followers from 1941 to 1957 was characterized by dozens of arrests year after year, many of them leading to jail sentences usually of one year for simple followers and of up to five years for several of their leaders. Some of them accumulated fifteen or more years of banishment, while one of them, Neloia, was banished for life (see Tabani 2008a). Many extensive reports and analyses of John Frum outbreaks with their causes and consequences, as well as letters and statements about the best strategy for calming down alleged John Frum lunatics, were produced by the colonial authorities as self-justification for the severity of their repression. However, the determination of the Tannese proved highly resilient decade after decade.

Administrators who had been initiated into these confidential files by studying them thus performed a rite of passage when they in turn became the new authors of them. They must indeed have discovered and become progressively aware that the hundreds of thousands of hours spent producing these files had not led to a successful strategy being devised for dealing with John Frum believers. Despite their disillusion, they continued, one after the other, to write the secret history of a total failure. For the John Frum files show how the colonial administration was turned into an amazing paper tiger, as inquisitive as it was incapable of returning the Tannese to colonial discipline. Their contributors were convinced that the constant bureaucratic monitoring of John Frum activities and beliefs would provide them with the keys to eradicate this lasting protest. However, colonial faith in the knowledge power of archives, praised as a 'supreme technology of the late nineteenth century imperial state' (Stoler 2002:97), led the Tannese to strengthen their resistance to colonial domination. Compulsively produced and accumulated, these archival records exerted a serious influence over the John Frum movement, though not in the way the administrators expected.

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SYMBOLIC ASPECTS OF THE JOHN FRUM FILES

Since I cannot go into the details in any depth here, I will highlight a few important aspects of the bureaucratic process through which the John Frum files were produced. One of their main purposes was indeed political, as most of the correspondence and documents deal with the best way to repress John Frum followers and to bring the

movement to an end. The 'Native Code' (a collection of the laws of the Condominium applied to the indigenous population and to relations between natives and whites) was no longer adapted to coping with such protest movements as outbreaks of indigenous discontent (Nicol 04/06/1941, WPA 1940–1942). The Condominium's administrators had to find a legal basis for the struggle against these new and unexpected expressions of dissent. Before the appearance of John Frum, the control of moral behaviour was very present in native court judgments, which were filled with cases of adultery, the rape of minors and incest (WPA 1916–1969). But with the rise of the John Frum movement, all former allegations became secondary compared to the new charge of 'spreading false rumours', which started to constitute the main grounds for arrest, imprisonment and banishment. Though clothed as a cult, John Frum talk was clearly seen as political rebellion. In May 1941 BDA Nicol stated that the secrecy and exuberant direction of the movement 'has made it difficult to face the problem in an ordinary manner. [...] Of course it all boils down [among John Frum followers] to the old slogan "Tanna for the Tannese"' (Nicol 21/05/1941, WPA 1940–1942).

The colonial administrators had very limited knowledge of cargo cults, which were first mentioned in a confidential note written by Guiart in 1949 (16/03/1949, WPA 1948–1951). In the few reports in which this expression was used, it referred to a phenomenon that was considered a great danger in the New Hebrides, linked to a permanent worry about a possible convergence of different cultic movements spreading across the archipelago. For instance, when the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific was informed about the existence of the Marching Rule movement in Malaita in the Solomons, he immediately warned the BRC in Port Vila about similarities with John Frum. In October 1947, he noted: 'this type of movement is a manifestation which is liable to occur in all primitive communities from time to time and the only reply is education combined with economic and political development' (WPA 1945–1948). The problem for the authorities was clearly how to deal with a nationalistic threat that was still considered immature and to counter perplexing forms of political emancipation, as revealed through the extraordinary expectations of the Tannese after the occupation of the New Hebrides by the US Army in March 1942:

[Port] Vila was full of Americans and many more are coming both to Vila and Tanna [...] American dollar bills are Jonfrum's money [...] All Americans are black and they will shortly take over the islands [...] The Americans gave grog to the prisoners, took them out of jail and are paying them wages (Nicol 10/07/1942, WPA 1942–1945).

Practically all the island is prepared to go [to work for the Americans]. Their firm belief is that Jonfrum will come from America so they are too pleased to help them. It is useless to argue with them and in time they may find out the truth (Nicol 13/08/1942, WPA 1942–1945).

The emergence of an increasing number of cultic movements in the New Hebrides was already a reality in the 1940s. Other movements, pre-existing the John Frum prophecies, had given the colonial administration much cause for concern, like the Rongofuro affair regarding the prophetic murder of a settler named Clappot in Santo in 1923 (Raff 1928), followed in 1944 by the development of the Naked Cult and other movements among the same communities (Miller 1948, Guiart 1958). Aniwa and Futuna, neighbouring islands to Tanna, had already been directly influenced by the John Frum movement.

However, the John Frum files are particularly relevant for the way in which the colonial administration itself contributed to the spread of these new expressions of protest in other places in Vanuatu. Several John Frum leaders banished for several years to Port Vila (Efate), Lamap (Malekula) and Malo (Santo) had generated increasing unrest among other islanders there, as well as on islands like Ambrym, Pentecost and Paama, even if they did not explicitly refer to the inspirational source of their proselytism. A report by Guiart in the archives from November 1949 listed all the administrative observations about related cultic manifestations outside Tanna (WPA 1948–1951).

However, the most impressive evidence of the convergence of cultic threats is provided in the correspondence between Nakomaha and a renowned prophetic leader from Santo Island, Charley Ragrag (WPA 1957–1961). According to Jean-Louis Rallu, these exchanges represent a clear attempt by these two cult leaders to establish an alliance between indigenous movements from the north and south of the archipelago (personal communication 2017). This strategy of a pan-New Hebrides anti-colonial convergence of cultic and neo-customary movements was later revived by Jimmy Stevens, the leader of the Nagriamel movement, whose strongholds were located in the northern part of Vanuatu (see Tabani 2008b). The adoption of a strategy of non-intervention by the colonial administration in the mid-1950s also generated a large number of observations and analyses. The purpose was to bring the John Frum movement to an end by trivializing its deviant behaviour. Support for the creation of local councils was considered the best option for influencing a rational alternative. In 1950 a significant breakdown in John Frum activities was interpreted as a possible positive outcome. However, BDA Barrow reported at the time that the disappearance of John Frum could create a dangerous void, since the Condominium was totally incapable of sustaining any form of basic modern development and could not allow the introduction of a system of indirect rule, seen as a first step towards political emancipation. In these circumstances a revival of Christianity was strongly hoped for, especially to defeat the spread of communism, as stated in an annotation by BRC Blandy (31/10/1950, 1945–1948).

Another noteworthy political dimension revealed by the John Frum files was the duplicity of the 'entente cordiale' policy that was supposed to govern the two-headed colonial power of the Condominium. Many documents written by British administrators concern repeated Anglo-French differences regarding the struggle against John Frum beliefs and activities. In his annual report for 1942, for example, the French Resident Commissioner (FRC) Kuter had already indicated that seditious action taken in Tanna

was clearly 'anti-British'. He further claimed that, because of the closeness of the British administration and the Presbyterian mission, 'the British policy alone is responsible for all these troubles' (ATNC 1944–1970).

In the World War II period, during the US period of command in the archipelago, the French still expected to be able to annex the New Hebrides and keep the islands for themselves alone once the war had ended. From then on the French authorities, unlike the British, tended to minimize the danger represented by John Frum. As early as November 1943, FRC Houques-Fourcade wrote to BRC Blandy to disagree about the importance attached to the troubles: 'it may not be appropriate for us to stress the scope and gravity of this seditious movement by Tannese natives – we should not give any opportunity to the Americans to take steps against any future referendum' (17/11/1943, WPA 1942–1945).

The French mainly feared that John Frum demonstrations would prove a negative factor for the defence of their colonial interests in the Pacific. They preferred to mock the irrationality of the Tannese:

The ravings of this visionary [named John Frum] remind me of those lunatics whose brain has been deformed by watching too many detective movies at the cinema. However, I doubt that Jonfrum knows what a 'magic lantern' is, and I have no idea if the writings of Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace, Ph. Oppenheim, Agatha Christie, etc., have already been translated into Tannese languages (Kuter 24/06/1941, WPA 1942–1945).

In December 1949, BDA Barrow reported to BRC Blandy on the indulgent attitude of the French regarding political interference by foreigners among John Frum followers. He denounced an affair in which French traders had concerned themselves too much with native politics and accused the French authorities of being 'guilty of a degree of irresponsible stupidity which in view of the potential danger of Jonfrumism is little short of criminal' (Barrow 31/12/1949, WPA 1948–1951). To this comment, Blandy added the handwritten annotation: 'as usual'. Similarly, when the non-intervention policy was being launched as an initiative of the British authorities, the French administration started to claim their collusion of interests with the John Frum movement. BDA Allen wrote in April 1974:

The success of this approach, which is without a clearly defined direction, depends very much on the wits and experience of the District Agents. Unless there is a complete harmony of view point between the two, the approach is likely to be cumbersome [...] On the French side, however, the approach in the early 1960s had swung to the sycophantic. In remonstrating with the [East Tanna] leaders for drilling with [false wooden] muskets, the FDA [French District Agent] argued that the Law of John Frum was the Law of Peace and Love; thus by making these weapons they had broken His Law. Not only might it be inferred that he [the FDA] accepted John Frum and his teaching, but also that he had become one of its advocates (NA 1974–1975a).

While in its political aspects the John Frum movement immediately called to mind the British administration, the economic aspects of its followers' claims were seen as symptomatic of their deviant behaviour, as well as being a possible remedy for calming down all the social disturbances. The materialist expectations of John Frum followers seriously upset BDA Nicol and all his successors. In a report of January 1942, he denounced the movement with racist overtones:

This movement [is] [...] marked by a poverty of ideas. Their heaven on earth is purely materialistic, food and money without work, sensual pleasure ad libitum, houses like Europeans which they could not keep clean for a week, a slavish copy of European comforts without any knowledge of how they could be acquired. I have had complaints made that the missions teach them nothing but the bible. I have told them that if they want more they must tax themselves and pay for it (Nicol 06/01/1942, WPA 1940–1942).

The movement's rejection of money was also one of the colonial authorities' main concerns, especially as it affected them directly, other problems being more generally related to the role of the missions in relation to the population. In their materialist analysis, Condominium administrators suggested that, behind the rise of Jonfrumism on Tanna, there was a discrepancy between the demand and supply of commodities. The fall in the price of copra and the global context of World War II had allegedly trapped people in a pattern of inactivity:

With the fall of France in 1940, the copra market for Tanna virtually disappeared. As a consequence, the western natives decided not to make any more copra. The consequent loss of revenue and idleness among the natives has given them the cause and time to think about their real and imaginary ills. As a result, expressions of discontent have appeared (Major Patten 1943, WPA 1942–1945).

When the stores fell empty, attempting to earn money became pointless. In the view of the colonial government, the commodity market and the trade in manufactured goods should have been reactivated in order to put a stop to this indigenous movement: 'When gardens are finished being made in December, I have hopes of starting the natives on the west coast making copra. This would keep them busy. Idleness is their curse' (Nicol 15/11/1943, WPA 1942–1945).

Thus, Jonfrumism was supposed to draw its energy from complete idleness: instead of working and consuming, people spent their days in uncontrolled kava-drinking and erratic dancing, outside any traditional framework: 'Jonfrum is "quiet" in good times when "idle hands" are few' (Blandy 14/10/1948, WPA 1948–1951). However, despite a later increase in the price of copra, nobody went back to work. A rising awareness of exploitation by foreign employers or traders was fuelled by memories of past experiences. Working hard and earning little was seen as the sole therapy that could make the Tannese aware of the real price of commodity consumption and the genuine value of development. In the eyes of the British administrators, the main cause of the

John Frum movement's success was the failure of the Condominium authorities to agree on a sustainable policy of economic development: 'a progressive Government policy of native development and welfare [...] could do a lot to help give people an interest in life. Under the Condominium however there seems no chance of it' (Barrow 31/10/1950, WPA 1945–1948).

In the reports of regular tours made by BDAs on Tanna, the general administration files of the New Hebrides Southern District also reveal how in comparison, the calmness of the situation was felt as boring by foreign administrators.¹⁰ However, when the reports focused on Tanna, they expressed real excitement on the part of their authors, who wrote endlessly about any kind of event linked to John Frum. An ambivalent sentiment of simultaneous fascination with and rejection of John Frum dreams or visions was shared by many successive BDAs, whereas FDAs preferred to view this movement as an example of neo-traditional folklore that might be manipulated for political purposes. The John Frum files are particularly relevant to the symbolic aspects of interactions between BDAs and the Tannese. Nicol, for instance, who suffered no challenge to his sovereign authority, became during his rule the main opponent of John Frum and his central symbolic counterpart: '[In 1941] Jon Frum was said to have visited the Government Agent and punched his nose, drunk beer at a trader's and driven in a golden car to another' (Revd. Bell, cited by Guiart 1956:412).

A couple of years later, BDA Bristow started being praised by the Tannese for having obliged FDA Demarbre to stop exploiting the natives with forced labour. He was raised by John Frum followers to the rank of a hidden son of Noah, a syncretic personification of the biblical Noah (Guiart 1956:212). The obsessive focus on John Frum activities, as recorded in the files by successive BDAs, led some of them to become directly part of the John Frum mythology as a result of their struggle against the movement. In an interview, Bristow explained that, due to this experience,

he felt his job on Tanna had been futile. It seemed to him now [in 1995], and perhaps then as well, that there was nothing he could have done to control the John Frum movement. It was an exercise in futility to try to suppress it; it was equally futile to expect to wait it out (Rodman 2001:160).

Beyond defending colonial reasons of state, the authors of the John Frum files, by adding to these writings day after day, year after year, were protecting their own personal philosophical positions. The main goal of these files was to help in the struggle against the political consequences of a cultic movement that could not be considered an acceptable religion by administrators of a secular way of thinking. Most of the main authors of these files would have shared the conclusion of the documentary film-maker David Attenborough in his "John Frum cargo cult", a production of 1960:

¹⁰ The Southern District encompassed the islands of Tanna, Aneityum, Futuna, Erromango and Aniwa, which, since Vanuatu's independence, form TAFEA province.

The last day of our visit, [a John Frum leader] Nampas said something that showed clearly that he was either a rogue or a mad man [...] perhaps Nampas was deluded, but if he was, then the whole population of Tanna is deluded. Anyway, delusion is a rather hard word to use when we are talking about religion (Attenborough 1960).

This quote recalls Richard Dawkins' paraphrase of a quote from Robert M. Pirsig in his book "The God delusion" (which also refers to Attenborough's film): 'When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion, it is called a religion' (Dawkins 2006:28). However, nobody knows how far such material as that collected in the John Frum files could be used for the future creation of religious or sacred texts. At least they could be claimed by the Tannese ideologically as part of their intangible cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

According to Marshall Sahlins, anthropologists and historians of the Pacific share a 'false consciousness', the former when they tried to ignore 'the richness of the archival record for South Seas Islanders', the latter when they ignored 'these exotic histories just because they are culturally remote and as recorded do not go very far back' (1985:xviii). This comment reminds us that the archival turn in anthropology is part of a broader 'historical turn' in the social sciences (Stoler 2002:88). The addition of a historical dimension to anthropological studies became, for instance, a matter of epistemological urgency in studying the peoples of the Pacific after their countries' independence and their growing need to contribute themselves to the writing of their own pasts.

From this perspective, the John Frum files constitute a major reference for current academic issues regarding those colonial documentary sources that are still frequently designated 'cargo cult archives' by anthropologists. In this article I have tried to highlight the contrast between older ethnographic reports documenting the rise and fall of millenarian movements of brief duration like the Vailala Madness and the massive production of administrative records on the resilience of these phenomena during and after World War Two. However, to lay stress on the comparative value of the John Frum archive also implies questioning the limits of such a specific historical body of documentation. Administrative records and the ethnographic data collected by successive generations of anthropologists should not automatically be amalgamated with broader fictional literature focusing on cargo cults, as that would mean merging them with 'cargo texts' as exclusively inspired by the Western imagination.

Colonial administrators and the later anthropologists who conducted fieldwork on Tanna rarely referred to the John Frum movement as a cargo cult in their accounts of it. John Frum followers also reject any association with so-called 'kago kalja' (Bislama for 'cargo culture'), a consumerist perspective which in their mind belongs first and foremost to foreigners. Nevertheless, John Frum has become one of the most famous cargo

cults in the vast anthropological literature, and today's Tannese are also conscious of this renown, which they play with for diverse political and economic purposes.

Movements that were labelled cargo cults in colonial times were viewed by the first Melanesian governments as detrimental to their nation-building objectives. However, for contemporary Melanesian communities, these movements can still represent neo-traditional aspects of their cultural heritage. For instance, since its beginning, the John Frum movement has been inseparable from the defence of Tannese custom (*kastom*). As such it might have appeared to anthropologists as a forerunner of the politics of culture and identity rhetoric which became so vibrant in post-colonial times and has continued until today, instead of as a cargo cult. The John Frum files show that new cultic activities and beliefs have been accompanied by a constant willingness to return to the 'full darkness' claimed by the cult's followers (BDA Colley 30/06/1949, WPA 1948–1951): 'Custom, like John Frum is raised as a defence against interference in Tannese affairs, and as an argument to justify non-cooperation [...] The movement in 1941 was, whatever the influences of the John Frum myth, a return to pagan practices [...]' (BDA Allen 12/07/1960, WPA 1957–1961).

These neo-pagan aspects of John Frum activities, interwoven with neo-Christian millenarian expectations, were the main argument the colonial authorities used to characterize the John Frum movement as an immature political rebellion, since for them it was based on exuberant and unacceptable conceptualizations of religion. The inability of the colonial authorities to suppress it was also an acknowledgement of the failure of using the files as bureaucratic weapon. The Tannese showed a great capacity to adapt to the administration's quest to study the causes of social unrest. The confidentiality in which the files were held by their colonial authors was counterbalanced by the secrecy regarding John Frum affairs imposed on foreigners by the followers of that movement.

While in Tanna, I had many opportunities to confront colonial reports with oral traditions and historical memory, and I could almost always confirm the claims made by my informants that most of the details contained in these reports were perfectly correct and that they corresponded to and completed local oral accounts (see Tabani 2014). But beyond the fact that the John Frum files are consistent with local oral narrative accounts, they also demonstrate how Westerners became locally part of newly-fashioned mythologies and how their strong interactions with the Tannese encouraged the latter to ritualize the power and material influences of the former. The John Frum movement has drawn much of its legitimacy from the colonial repression it endured, and this repression was continuously implemented and recorded by means of the John Frum files. These two antagonistic forms of action complemented each other. Archived prophecies have historically been turned into prophetic archives, into a symbol of the still unfinished story of a cultural breach between Europeans and Tannese, in which both sides have been equally involved.

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